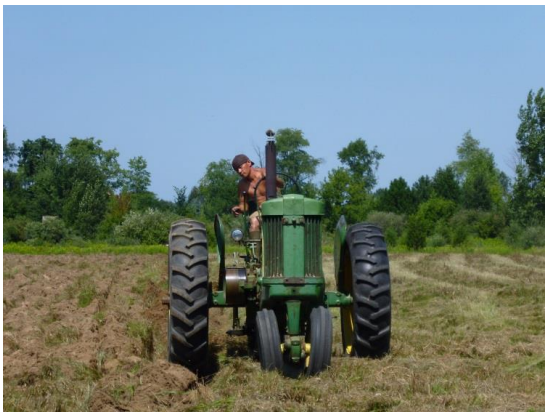
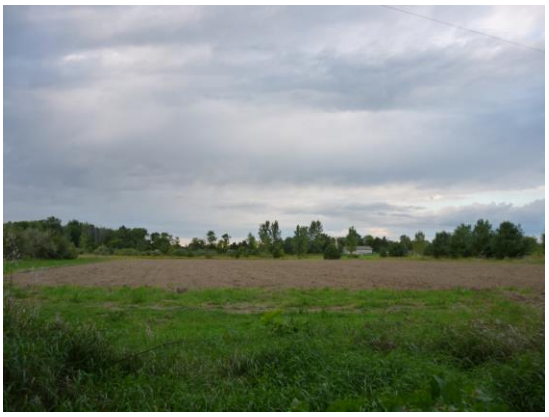
TWO TRACKS ACRES NEWSLETTER

September 2013





TILLING

Believe it or not, it's already time to start thinking about next year. What was once a hay field behind our house has been plowed and tilled so that it can be planted. Much of our land remains in pasture, but it is strange to look out the window and see soil where tall grass used to be. I had mixed feelings as I watched the tractor overturning huge swathes of soil; even though I am excited to plant, it feels strange that we are changing the landscape so drastically. In the newly tilled land, we will plant organic wheat for animal feed and for grinding into flour to make bread next year. At first I was worried about the plowing. After all, wasn't the mouldboard plow largely responsible for the dustbowl? I learned that yes, plowing can be bad if done each year for a number of years. The heavy weight of the tractor, the overturning of the soil and disturbance of the topsoil, can cause the ground to become too compact beneath the first few feet in an effect known as hardpan. As most growers know, it is very difficult to grow plants in soil that is overly compacted because roots cannot break through, microorganisms are destroyed, and erosion can occur. However, plowing only once every few years and a good crop rotation including green manure and biomass can avoid most of these problems. Roots from cover crops that act as green manure can reach deep into the soil and loosen the dirt, while bringing nutrients toward the surface. They also add to the soil health when tilled under because they decompose into food for the next plants. Of course, there is always an argument for not tilling at all, a technique I hope to research further. For now, November first is our start date for sowing winter wheat.

TEAM MAMA

How does a chicken hatch an egg? By teaming up with another chicken, of course! I mentioned in an earlier newsletter how Broody, one of our egg layers, was trying to hatch eggs with little success. I guess she solved that problem, because one day I walked into the coop and there were two chickens sitting together on the same nest. They tag teamed the incubating job for the required 21 days and voila, we have two baby chicks to show for it. Yay mamas.

FARMING CERTIFICATIONS: A BREAKDOWN

Maybe you have heard of some of these labels: Organic, GAP, MAEP, FSMA. These random letters are common in farming lingo. They represent different types of certification for farms, implying different production practices. But for those who don't farm for a living, it can be hard to know how farms operate just based on these labels, without a little more information.

You have of course heard of Organic certification. An organic label is hard to attain, and rightly so. Organic practices must be followed strictly, with tracking and documents to prove that the only pesticides and fertilizers used are organic ones (much healthier compounds which quickly erode), that seeds are organic, and so on. You have probably also heard of mega farms that are organic, challenging us to define exactly what types of farming we support. Is organic sustainable if it applies to monocropping? And how about wise uses of water, soil, etc. That is why I encourage everyone to speak with their farmer or even visit farms in order to understand which practices their grower uses.

Some newer acronyms have entered the producer's world within the past few years. GAP, or Good Agricultural Practices, is a voluntary certification that a farm can obtain which is considered one of the safest ways of growing and harvesting food. And, ok, I'll just say it – I don't like the GAP requirements at all. Most large institutions that order food such as Walmart, Meijers, U of M, etc, require a farm to be GAP certified before they will buy its produce. GAP guarantees that food is 'super clean' by keeping possible contaminants as separate from the food as is possible while in the field. Wildlife contact (including birds) with the produce must be controlled. All containers must be sanitized daily. The emphasis is on eliminating the bacteria and bad microbes that could cause disease. I have a few problems with this. The separation of farming from nature does not encourage a diverse ecosystem, but rather calls for the farmer to exercise even tighter control over the environment, essentially creating more work for the farmer and requiring greater artificial inputs to make up for the lack of natural diversity. Without a lot of biodiversity, soil – the heart and soul of a farm – is not alive. It requires microbes, bacteria, fungi, insects, and all manner of things to be healthy. Secondly, the record keeping required and the cost of implementing such a system are extremely expensive. Thus, small farms lose access to this market – even if they were able to meet the demands of quantity.

Another voluntary certification is MAEAP (Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program), which is much more accessible. It still requires a good deal of record keeping, but focuses on sustainable and environmental safeguards without being unreasonable. This includes tracking the following: crop rotation; application of water, fertilizers and pesticides; and soil quality. The CSA coalition, a group of CSAs working together in Ann Arbor, has adopted this as a baseline certification for their farms. It guarantees customers that their food is grown responsibly. Also, the coalition hopes to approach some key health insurance companies about offering membership rebates for those insurance members who join CSAs. The insurance companies cut down on costs by encouraging people to eat healthier, the CSA

is more affordable for participants, and more food is bought locally. We are waiting to see how this project works and if the insurance companies are willing to accept MAEAP certification as an adequate food safety guideline.

Finally, FSMA, or the Food Safety Modernization Act, is a new set of regulations being required of all vegetable farms that gross over $500,000. In the past, there were no such laws monitoring growers. Unfortunately, the FSMA program tends to fall along the same lines as GAP in its requirements, while a little less strict. Public input is still being accepted at this time before the bill is passed.

I am not against government oversight of food production. The question I would like to raise is how far should the oversight go? Can the economy be self-regulating, with irresponsible farmers going out of business, or does the government need to protect us further? Also, do these regulations (GAP, FSMA) take us in the right direction for how we want our farming systems to operate, with cleanliness gained at the expense of biodiversity?

Thanks and be well!